

Verulam Trout

Fly Fishing for Trout at Riverside Road and Bellows Mill

A Newcomers Guide

Riverside Road

Verulam Angling Club acquired the lease for Riverside Road around 1965 and the existing watercress beds were dug out to form a lake. This was extended some twenty years later by excavating the bays to the left of the entrance gate. The water is spring fed from the wildlife area (also ex watercress beds) via a culvert under the embankment to the north of the Alban Way footpath that forms our northern boundary. There are also springs along the edge of the lake parallel to the embankment. The area of water is about an acre with an average depth of around six feet. The deepest part is about two thirds of the way towards the outlet at the southern end where the lake begins to narrow. There are no real shallow parts and the depth is some five feet or so close to the edge. Because of this care must be taken close to the edge as falling in is easier than getting out. Although the water quality is generally high, being in one of Hertfordshire's chalk stream valleys, the club has installed aerators at three points in the lake for use in times of drought and or high temperatures.

Fly-fishing for trout begins when the coarse fishing season finishes at the end of February and continues for ten weeks until early May. Currently we stock with around 250 to 300 trout averaging 2 lbs with a handful of larger fish for interest. This is repeated every two weeks or so to the end of the ten week season.

The club fly-fishing rules have evolved over the years and from experience we have found that a strict three fish limit keeps the costs down whilst still giving good sport. All trout caught must be killed and once the three fish limit has been reached the angler must stop fishing for that day. We have found that catch and release in a small water makes the trout difficult to catch again.

The following is intended as a guide for those new to fishing this water and it must be remembered that, as with all angling, the information should be adapted to fit your personal preferences within the rules.

A 9' 6" rod capable of casting a weight 7 line is usually favoured and although long casting is not necessary a shorter rod can make avoiding bank side vegetation difficult. Newly stocked fish soon become wary and consequently the longest leader that you can manage will generally promote more takes, particularly with a floating line. Somewhere between one and two times the length of the rod is recommended.

As with many things, a compromise must be sought regarding the strength of leaders and their visibility to the trout. Because of the size of the fish it is suggested that the point should not be below 8lbs breaking strain. A fluorocarbon tippet is recommended. because of its high strength to diameter ratio and near invisibility underwater. Many experienced coarse anglers may be surprised by this because the trout are not that big compared to, say, carp but the odds of a smash take mean that a lighter point may risk losing a good fish; not good for the angler or the fish.

A landing net around 18" to 20" across is recommended to accommodate any larger fish that may be encountered and should have sufficient depth to prevent a lively fish jumping out. A minimum 4' handle will help clear any marginal weed growth.

There is relatively little early fly life in the lake with the odd sedge fly and pond olives only beginning to appear as our season closes. Consequently, in common with other

fisheries, most members find lure fishing to be more successful early on and nymphs and traditional wet flies better as the season progresses.

Although the lake is not particularly deep, using a sinking line and fishing a lure at the beginning of the season will ensure you get down to the trout. Remember, when water is below 4 degrees centigrade the cold water is on the surface with the warmer at the bottom. Above 4 degrees the reverse is true.

However many members find that this method produces their limit in a relatively short time and prefer to fish with a floating line and a nymph in order to extend their day. It must be said that this tactic does not always work out by sometimes being even more effective. One of the pleasures of fly-fishing at Riverside Road is that it affords a variety of fishing styles and tastes but usually provides good results. As ever there are days when only a precise method and approach will catch fish. Again, in common with other angling, the fishermen who tread lightly and keep a low profile can only increase their chances.

The freshly stocked fish soon spread out across the lake but, depending on a number of factors, will on occasions prefer to migrate to a specific area. The area where the spring water enters the lake near the tin shed nearly always seems to hold fish, possibly because the water temperature is fairly constant. However, be flexible. Because of the relatively small size of the venue the number of anglers is limited daily to allow a degree of roving in order to find the "hot spot". For this reason it pays to be adaptable and move from time to time if your chosen spot is not very productive.

After the first week or so many members find that a slow or very slow retrieve will produce more takes and while savage takes are always to be expected, hence the 8 lb leader, many more will be barely perceptible.

The following is a suggestion of flies to try.

Lures and Attractors.

Cat's whisker. Viva. Gold head. Appetiser. Blob (various colours). Booby (various colours). Minkie. Sweeny Todd.

Traditional Wet Flies

Black Pennell, Diawl Bach, Gold Ribbed Hares Ear, Invicta, Connemara Black, Mallard & Claret, Butcher, Zulu.

Nymphs

Pheasant Tail, Buzzer (various colours), Mayfly nymph, Damselfly nymph, Montana, Green Nymph.

There will be many Riverside regulars who will disagree strongly with the above list not least because their favourite is missing. No dry flies are included because there are few reports of their success but they are not to be forgotten and should be used if the occasion arises.

If you find yourself struggling when other are catching, just ask what they are using. Most regulars will be only too happy to show you what has been successful.

Ford Lake, Bellows Mill

Verulam Angling Club purchased Bellows Mill Fishery in 2010 and from the outset it was agreed that one of the two lakes should become a dedicated trout fly-fishery.

Although Mill Lake has a shallower bank profile more suited to fly casting it lacked the depth trout require to thrive and so Ford Lake was chosen to develop for fly-fishing. Ford Lake is fed from the River Ouzel that marks our boundary to the north west of the fishery and drains into Mill Lake before returning to the river by Bellows Mill.

The first few months of VAC ownership in 2011 saw much work on both lakes removing weed and attempting to increase the depth. This was not easy as the bed was fine silt which refused to solidify and so a retaining mesh had to be installed around the margins to hold the silt back. This also prevented the construction of the planned peninsulas that had been part of the design at Riverside Road. After some experimenting the current platforms were devised and have proved so successful that this pattern has been copied at Riverside Road where crayfish have undermined the bank. They also reduce the casting problems with the high banks on Ford Lake.

With an average depth of around six feet the water was allowed to settle and clear with the first stock of trout introduced in September 2011. Before fishing started a hut was erected to keep the record book. In 2015 a larger "lodge" was build and armchairs added so that members could have a coffee break in shelter if the weather turned inclement.

Sometimes crystal clear water allows members to see the bottom right across the lake with the novel experience of seeing trout at depth following and occasionally taking artificial flies without any other indication of what was happening. At this time it was possible to cast a dry fly to your chosen fish and watch as it was taken or rejected.

The downside was that the clarity of the water encouraged weed to flourish that, in time, needed to be cut back and this in turn appears to colour the water occasionally although this varies depending on temperature and time of year.

Because the lake is relatively shallow the water warms up during June, July and August and it was decided not to stock during these months but, subject to conditions, fishing can continue.

Ford Lake is stocked on a similar model as Riverside Road with an addition of a few brown trout between one and two pounds. If caught these must be returned to the water immediately without harm on a catch and release basis and are not counted towards your three fish limit

One of the highlights of Bellows Mill is that, even though we finish stocking in December, the fly-fishing remains good throughout the winter months and recently has proved better than the summer. This has evolved into two stocked "seasons", one from March to the end of July and a second from mid September to December. From December fishing is allowed on a reduced cost day ticket basis but no further stock is added. The addition of Ford Lake at Bellows Mill means that VAC members have access to trout fly-fishing throughout the year, although we currently choose to rest the venue from July to mid September because of the warmer water.

Tackle and flies for Bellows Mill are the same as Riverside Road with the occasional bonus of good dry-fly fishing courtesy of mayflies and other natural insect immigrants from the river Ouzel.